

Sermon for Thursday, November 23, 1978, by Dr. Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri
Thanksgiving, 1978

"THE SECOND MAGIC WORD"

St. Luke 17:11-19

Text: "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising
God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving
him thanks." Verse 15-16a

When the children were young I did my best to teach them politeness and to say "please" and "thank you". When they forgot, I would always ask them, "What is the magic word." Of course, this was not my invention. Actually I learned it from Captain Kangaroo. As a matter of fact, before I selected my sermon title, just to check it out, I said to one of the secretaries, "What is the magic word?" "Why," she said, "it's please and thank you." Well, this morning I want to talk about the second of those magic words. It seems appropriate on this Thanksgiving morning to talk about saying "thank you" since ingratitude is an old, old sin. Back in 1860 a young man named Edward Spencer was studying at Northwestern University. One morning word came that a passenger ship had sunk in the lake at some distance from the shore. He hurried to the lake, plunged into the freezing water and pulled a woman to shore who had been clinging to a piece of wreckage. Again and again he went back into the water and when it was over, he was credited with saving seventeen people. That incredible human effort broke his health and drastically affected his career. In later years Edward Spencer admitted that not a one of the seventeen people had ever thanked him.

The first thing I want to say is this: we need to learn to be a blessing counter. Are you a blessing counter? Do you count your blessings for what you have or do you count the things you don't have. A lot of us are guilty of the "I don't have" syndrome. Instead of looking at what we do have, too often we look at what our neighbor might have and we begin to feel sorry for ourselves because they have some things we don't have. Are you ever guilty of that? I know I am!

Over in Philippians St. Paul makes an interesting statement. He writes, "for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned to, the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want." Well, have you learned that secret? When our founding fathers established the first Thanksgiving, there were a lot of things they didn't have. They had faced poverty, disease, incredibly bad weather, hostile Indians, and a lot of other deprivations. Yet, on that first Thanksgiving day they were grateful for what they did have. They learned to say the second magic word.

So the first thing we need to do is to learn to be a blessing counter. Let me suggest several areas where we need to be blessing counters. One area is the home. How careful are we to show gratitude to our spouse for the things he or she does for us? Do you show appreciation for a good meal, a clean shirt, a neat house? Or do you show thankfulness for the work and labor and long hours that bring in the monthly check? People today often complain that children are so ungrateful. But isn't ingratitude something we learn from our parents? So if your children are not very appreciative, maybe its because they aren't learning that attitude from you! Or again, have you ever said thank you to your in-laws? Here's the young lady you took for your wife, absolutely free. But for years she had been fed, clothed, educated, spanked when necessary, and now she's presented to you free of charge. Has anybody said thank you? As you think about what you do have in your home, be a blessing counter and be thankful for what you do have.

A second area we need to be a blessing counter is that of our country. A lot of people--and I confess I am frequently one of them--complain about the way our country is going to the dogs, the waste of government, high taxes, and a lot of other things. But let me ask you, would you like to live in any other country? I've traveled to a number of countries of the world, but I haven't found one yet I would swap for being an American. The other day my son and I were riding in the car and a commercial came on the radio in which Don Knotts is promoting mailgram service as a way of getting your congressman's attention. Mark commented that America is one of the few places in the world that a company would promote its product on the basis of criticizing the government for it wouldn't be permitted in most places. Well, I'm grateful for a country like that. We have a lot of criticism of America, but do you know, a study was recently published in the Cambridge Graduate by a Black African journalist from Rhodesia in which he pointed out that the American blacks own more real estate, have more cars and possess more Ph.D's than all of the rest of the black people in the world combined. So, while we still have a lot to do in America to bring about equality and to care for the poor, still, it is the greatest country in the world and I for one am thankful for it.

Some years ago I visited Jamestown, Virginia and watched the play entitled "The Common Glory." In one scene Thomas Jefferson is working on the Declaration of Independence and he writes that in this new nation, every man is entitled to the right to life, liberty and happiness. But then he pauses for a long moment and scratches out happiness because that cannot be guaranteed to anybody. Then he writes in "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." And that's a right you and I have in this great country of ours. We ought to be deeply grateful for it.

The other day I buried Eunice White, a member of our congregation. Eunice was born on the 4th of July. She felt proud to share her nation's birthday and was intensely patriotic. At her funeral we played the song, "America" and it was deeply moving. For me, patriotism isn't old fashioned or out of date. I'm proud to be an American, grateful to our founding fathers, and thankful for a land such as ours.

A third area in which we ought to be grateful is spiritually. We ought to be a blessing counter when it comes to God. In our Scripture this morning we read of ten lepers who were healed, but only one returned to express his thanks to Jesus. I suspect most of us are guilty of that sort of ingratitude. There is an old legend about two angels who were sent to earth to gather up the prayers of men. The first angel was to fill his basket with all of the petitions and requests of men. The second angel was to fill his basket with the prayers of thanksgiving that men made to God. When the first angel returned, he was struggling under the burden of a basket heaped to overflowing with the requests of mankind. But when the second angel returned, he carried the basket lightly in one hand, for it contained only a few prayers of thanksgiving. Is that true in your life? I suspect it is in the lives of most of us.

But it isn't always true. This day we celebrate was designed to say "thank you" to God. Those brave, heroic men and women who settled this great land were blessing counters. They were grateful for what they did have and they designed a day in which they could say "thank you" to God.

So we need to learn to be blessing counters, grateful for what we do have. And we need to count those blessings especially in the home, in our nation, and in our relationship to God. But let me mention a couple of other things about the second magic word that I think are important.

For one thing, saying "thank you" is important to you. There is something very healthy and healing in making us whole persons when we say thank you. Remember how Jesus healed ten lepers as recorded in our Bible reading this morning? Think how they must have felt as they walked along and suddenly they began to realize that something was happening to their bodies. Healing began to flow through them. How exciting that must have been! They must have run for their homes to share with their loved ones that they were healed. But one didn't do that. Instead, he turned back and fell at the feet of Jesus to express his gratitude. And then Jesus said a strange thing to him. He said, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well." Obviously he was not talking about the healing from leprosy. That had already occurred. No, I think he was talking about something even more important. He was talking about the inner being of that man--of inner wholeness and inner health. Somehow, in the process of showing gratitude, that healed leper became a whole person. You see, until you can show gratitude and thankfulness, something is missing in your life. You are not yet a whole person. The ungrateful person is somehow emotionally incomplete.

So, saying thank you is important for me. Until I can be grateful and express that thankfulness, some dimension is missing from my life, some ingredient is absent that keeps me from being a whole person.

But for a second thing, saying the second magic word is important to the other person--to one to whom you say, "thank you." This week I got two letters in the mail. One was from a former member of the church who had seen a letter to the editor I had written. He wrote to say "thank you" because he appreciated my stand and was grateful for ministers who would stand up and be counted. Do you think that was important to me? Well, you know it was. The second letter was from a family that I counseled with over two years ago. They are not members of our church and I had not seen them for several years. They wrote to say how happy they were that their family was still together, how excited they were about their new walk with Jesus, and how grateful they were to me for spending time with them over many months to help them work out their problems. Do you think that was important to me? I had invested a lot of time and effort and a lot of myself in working with them. And it was important to me to know that it had not been wasted. So, when we say the second magic word to others, it does something important for them and for their lives. Somehow it helps fulfill life to know we are appreciated.

Finally, in the light of this, let me make this suggestion to you: begin now to express your gratitude. Begin now to say to people who have been important in your life how thankful you are. Is there some retired school teacher who meant a lot to you when you were young? Is there some friend who did something special for you once? Is there some relative who has been important in your life? When there is a death in a family in the church, sometimes the biggest problems the ministers have is helping members of the family deal with guilt. You see, there are always things we wish we could undo or things we wish we had done. But now it is too late.

So, on this thanksgiving day, let's learn to be a blessing counter--to count the blessings we do have, especially the blessings of home, of country, of God. In the process something healing and healthful happens to us as we express our gratitude and something wonderful and meaningful happens in the lives of those to whom we say "thank you." Why not make a Thanksgiving Day resolution and go home to begin to say the second magic word.

Over in Corinthians, St. Paul writes, "thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift." That's the only time that word is used in the Bible. What is an unspeakable gift? Well, it means something that is beyond measure, something that is inexpressible or indescribable. Let me give you an illustration. When I was a pastor in West Texas, for a time I had a retired minister on my staff who had spent many years as a missionary in Africa. He told me how his first wife had died in childbirth there in the Congo, leaving him with a little infant son to care for. But how could he? There was no hospital, no store from which to buy baby food. Fortunately, the wife of a fellow missionary had a son also who was six weeks old and she was breast feeding the infant. At the risk of her son's well being and her own health, she took Dr. Anderson's little son to nurse him during those critical months. She saved the child's life. Dr. Anderson said to me, "I was never able to thank her adequately. Try as I did, I could find no words that could express my gratitude for this unspeakable aid. She gave me something worth far more than all the gold this world contains."

In a far grander sense God put his son at risk for you and for me and that son suffered and died for us. Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift!